The Impact of Information and Communication Technology Application on the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

Cyril Ike Ph.D
Department of Political Science
University of Nigeria
+23468102979

Raymond Adibe Ph.D
Department of Political Science
University of Nigeria
+2348038054458

Itoro Akpan
Department of Political Science
University of Nigeria
+2347055179005

ABSTRACT
The electoral procedure in Nigeria over time has been marred by violence, partly as a result of the lack of confidence in the electoral commission and the entire process. This study examined the impact of the application of ICT on the conduct of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, and argued that technological innovations associated with the general elections improved the credibility of the outcome. This led to high approval ratings by electoral observers, reduced cases of post-election petition and violence, as well as renewed confidence in the electoral umpire (INEC) by the citizens. The study observed that there were some technical challenges associated with the adoption of biometric voting technology, mostly as a result of the novelty of the machines and a low-level of ICT literacy in the country. The study however supported the adoption and sustenance of such technologies in the electoral process. Thus, it recommended that there is a need to reform the Electoral Act so as to institutionalize the electronic voting system in the country, as well as improve on political education of citizens on the use of electronic machines in the electoral process in Nigeria.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Election, Biometric Voting Technology, Permanent Voters’ Card (PVC).

INTRODUCTION
The electoral procedure in Nigeria before and after independence has been associated with a lot of problems, some of which include multiple voter registration, multiple voting, ballot box snatching, thuggery, intimidation of voters by the security operatives among several others. The 1959 general elections conducted in Nigeria witnessed the mobilization of citizens along ethnic lines, as well as the use of traditional and religious institutions to foment violence and intimidate citizens in the exercise of their franchise. The 1964-5 federal elections witnessed outbreak of large scale violence. This was compounded by the use of law-enforcement agents to intimidate voters and facilitate election malpractices (Agbu, 2015).

The return to civilian rule in 1999 ushered a new hope of electoral reform, however, the zero-sum nature of the conduct of elections in Nigeria since 1999 further undermined the credibility of both elections and the election umpire in the country. Rigging has become a norm rather than the exception as elections have always been contested with a zero-sum mindset by politicians and political parties, a situation that made one observer describe rigging as synonymous with Nigerian elections (Bolaji, 2015). The general elections of 1999, 2003 and 2007 were rated by local and international observers as bad, worse and worst respectively. Some of the malpractices associated with the conduct of the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections include intimidations of voters, election observers and monitors; underage voting; hoarding of electoral materials by INEC officials such as including ballot papers and result sheets; ballot-box stuffing by dominant parties often with the connivance of INEC and security officials, snatching of ballot boxes and ballot papers, announcement of results where there was no voting (ICG Report, 2007). Observing the electoral trend in Nigeria since 1959, Kwaghga (2012:68-69) noted:

A survey of Nigeria electoral system (process) has increasingly revealed an important point of concern. This is sequel to the fact that the electoral system rather than provide expected results has become a misnomer and an episode that could be termed a farce. From 1959-2011 elections, the system has gradually moved from a falling system to a failed system, worse still the system recently has deepened its fraud characteristics and further increased it sophistication in rigging, that the survival and endurance of our democracy is highly questioned.

Poor electoral process in Nigeria has resulted in legitimacy crisis; it has constituted a major obstacle to enduring democracy in Nigeria. The democratic process had several times been terminated as a result of political upheavals arising from poor electoral process among others (Omodia, 2009). It is imperative that for Nigeria to attain satisfactory heights in its electoral system there is a great need that electoral processes and outcomes reflect truly the mandate of the people. Against the backdrop, President Goodluck Jonathan, himself a co-benefactor of the dubious 2007 presidential election noted:

Nigeria, Africa’s most populated nation, cannot aspire to a leadership position on the continent if it fails to organize a free credible poll. Several countries in Africa have
There is a consensus among scholars that data processed, analyzed, interpreted and which is comprehensive to the recipient of a message constitutes information. Basically, technology is seen to be the use of information to dominate and exploit nature in order to survive the complexities and challenges caused by a changing environment and further using the same to build a civilized culture for achieving higher standards of living. Information technology (IT) is concerned with managing and processing information using electronics, computers and computer software to convert, store, protect, process, transmit and retrieve information (Major, 2013). Information technology (IT) advanced to information and communication technology (ICT) as a result of the advent of the Internet, broadband connections and broad wave transmission energy, which enables a wider applicability (Major, 2013). From the foregoing, wider applicability of the ICT implies its adoptability in other sectors of the society like the electoral system.

Admittedly, the issue of the adoption of ICT in Nigeria’s elections has been a controversial one. One of the reasons is the low level of computer literacy among the citizens; another is the argument that the adoption of foreign technology in domestic elections is tantamount to underdevelopment as it is only a mere acquisition of developmental artifacts of other countries. The most recent argument against ICT adoption cites the violation of the constitution. The proponents argue that the section 52 (as amended) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria prohibits any form of electronic voting and therefore any subtle attempt to introduce it is a breach of the law. Notwithstanding the validity of some of the issues raised, the INEC went ahead with the adoption of ICT in the scheduled 2015 general elections. This paper examined the impact of ICT in the conduct of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

THE INTRODUCTION OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY INTO THE NIGERIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Since 1999 the country has conducted five elections that included the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections respectively. Almost all, except for the 2011 and 2015 elections were roundly condemned as not meeting the required global standard and therefore, not credible. For example, the 2003 general election left much to be desired. It was said that some results were written in the private homes of individuals, and in some cases, announced even the elections were conducted (Eguavuon, 2009:28). In other places, fictitious thumb-printed ballot papers were stuffed into ballot boxes and used to compute figures for pre-determined winners. Security agents were used to by government to intimidate and harass the electorate in different parts of the country. Money was used to influence the electorate to vote for unpopular candidates. In fact, the EU-EOM Team led by Marx Vanden Berg mentioned 12 states where fraud and irregularities were rampant and concluded that the “minimum standard for democratic elections were not met” (NDI,2003:30).

Furthermore, the general elections of April 2007 were characterized by several challenges and shortcomings as a result of poor preparations and widespread manipulations of the electoral process by the government using law enforcement agencies, especially the police and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The irregularities characterizing this election included the late arrival of materials and officials, stealing of ballot papers, vote buying, harassment, chanting, shooting and taunting of voters, lack of secrecy of voting, police interference, ballot snatching and stuffing, intimidation and political violence, denied access to polling stations, partiality of electoral officials and the police, improper voting procedures, late commencement of elections, and underage voting (TMG, 2007:132). In fact, the Domestic Election Observation Group after evaluating the reports of Monitors deployed throughout the country noted that the election was marred by numerous lapses, massive irregularities, and electoral malpractices, and came to the conclusion that the whole election was a charade and did not meet the minimum standards required for democratic elections (TMG, 2007:136).

Prior to the 2015 elections, INEC had set in motion various related reforms that paved way for the adoption of ICT to ensure credible and successful elections. Some of the measures were initially introduced for the 2011 elections with appreciable results, and implications for the 2015 elections, and include:

a) A new Biometric Register of Voters
b) A Re-Modified Open Ballot System (REMOBS)
c) Improved standards in production of Sensitive Electoral Materials (serial numbering and colour-coding of Ballot Papers and Results Sheets as well as security coding of Ballot boxes).
d) Revised framework for results collation and returns.
e) More open and transparent procedures, modalities and processes on Election Day (pasting of results at Polling Units and Collation Centres).
f) Improved Voter education and citizen engagement.
g) Creation of an Inter-agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) to ensure coordinated engagement of all security agencies during election periods (Jega, 2014:6).

From the experiences of the 2011 elections, INEC began early to plan for the 2015 elections with a view to consolidating the gains from the 2011 elections. Three focal points of structure, policy and plan were articulated; taking a hard look at INEC as an institution in respect of structure and human resources, as well as developing new policies on election
management, and strategic planning and election planning. In sum, the Commission in preparation for the 2015 elections did the followings:

a) Formulated a Strategic Plan (2012 – 2016), and a detailed Strategic Programme of Action.

b) Completed a detailed Election Project Plan leading up to the 2015 elections.

c) Conducted reorganisation and restructuring of the Commission.

d) Finalised the de-duplication of the biometric Register of Voters that included Continuous Voter Registration nationwide.

e) Drafted a Gender Policy intended to make the Commission’s work more gender sensitive, in line with global best practice.

f) Recommended improvements to the legal framework based on experiences from the 2011 elections, for constitutional action and on the Electoral Act.

g) Re-organised the Electoral Institute, with the appointment of a new Director-General and reconstitution of the board.

h) Established a Graphic Design Centre with support from The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), which for the first time gives the Commission the capacity to produce several election materials internally.

i) Embarked on a programme to review electoral constituencies and remap/reorganise polling units (Jega, 2014: 11).

These were some of the reform measures taken by INEC in the run-up to the 2015 elections. However, the most novel and strategic measure taken was the introduction and use of the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and Smart Card Reader (SCR). According to Agbu (2015), this was the “joker” that made it extremely difficult to rig the elections, in spite of the efforts made by desperate politicians to scuttle the use of this device. It is clearly evident from the exertions of INEC in preparing for the election that this was the main, but of course, not the only reason for the success of the 2015 election, in spite of opinion to the contrary. Anticipated challenges to the 2015 elections included insecurity, especially in the North East of the country, and its implications for conduct of elections; funding, attitude of the political class and citizen apathy. Indeed, INEC’s efforts at creating more polling units met with stiff opposition from some of the stakeholders believing that this was the fore-runner to rigging the election. However, it appears that these challenges were significantly surmounted as the elections proceeded (Agbu, 2015).

THE ADOPTION OF BIOMETRIC VOTING TECHNOLOGY AND THE CREDIBILITY OF THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Nigeria has used the Automated Fingerprint Identification System since the 2011 polls but the system only created a digital register to eliminate doubles from the list and was not capable of verifying the identity of voters at the polling stations (Piccolino, 2015). As a result of this, the INEC was therefore determined to correct its impression on most Nigerians and international observers as incompetent and this led to the introduction of new technologies for the 2015 general elections. Nwangwu (2015) noted that the administration of the elections witnessed the use of Smart Card Reader (SCR) for the authentication of biometric Permanent Voters’ Cards (PVCs) in the accreditation of voters. It became the most contemporary issue as reports on its adoption in other African countries seemed controversial. Other technological introductions worthy of note include the microchip equipped permanent voters card and the electronic voter registration system (introduced in 2011). These three ICT tools are not mutually exclusive as they interdependently fashioned the outcome of the 2015 general elections.

The use of permanent voters cards (PVCs) with biometric data and verification of voters through card readers had been planned since before the 2011 elections. The system recognizes the need for continuous efforts to reduce fraud so that Nigerians can have growing confidence in the fairness of elections. The PVCs and card readers were to address three problems that have been a recurring issue

- Inflation of the number of voters present in polling units
- Misrepresentation of whether individuals are truly present
- Fake and multiple registrations of voters to allow for inflated turnouts (NCS Situation Room, 2015).

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) produced Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) for 68,833,476 persons in the biometric Register of Voters ahead of the March 28th and April 11th, 2015 general elections. The PVC replaced the Temporary Voter Card (TVC) issued on the heels of registration of voters in 2011. These cards had many components and specialized features (e.g. base substrate, security printing, personalization, lamination and chip embedding), and they were designed with an average life span of ten (10) years. On the other hand, Smart Card Readers were to be used for the first time in Nigeria for the 2015 general elections through electronic voter authentication system. By manufacturer’s description and expected capability, the card reader uses a highly secure and cryptographic technology that is used commonly in devices that need to perform secure transactions, such as paying terminals. It has ultra-low power consumption, with a single core frequency of 1.2GHz and an Android 4.2.2 operating system. Its units were supposedly broadly subjected to Quality Assurance, Integrity and Functionality testing and found reliable in ease of use, battery life and speed of processing before the elections. In theory, it was to take an average of 10 seconds to authenticate a voter (Agbu, 2015).
The most popular issue in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria was the use of the smart card reader. The smart card reader was a critical component in the elections. It was used for the first time in the electoral process of Nigeria and it remains one of the greatest technological innovations of the 2015 general elections (Alebiosu, 2015). As Oche (2015) confirmed, “It was the first time Nigeria attempted to use card readers in an election.” Also, Nwangwu, (2015) reaffirmed this, further noting that the introduction of these devices was necessitated by the fact that reliable voter register and identification mechanism are some of the preconditions for free, fair and credible elections. The PVC with its microchip device was the enabling agent of the smart card reader in the accurate reading of the PVC as the microchip content was what retained information on the peculiar voter possessing the PVC and on confirmation of identity, the voter was then allowed to vote on election day.

Evidence that the introduction of biometric voting technology in the conduct of the 2015 general elections improved the credibility of the exercise exists. A comparative analysis of the vital statistics of the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections prove this.

### Table 1: Number of Electoral Petitions in the 2007, 2011 and 2015 General Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>GEOPOLITICAL ZONES</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NORTH- CENTRAL</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NORTH- EAST</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>NORTH- WEST</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SOUTH- EAST</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SOUTH- SOUTH</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SOUTH- WEST</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Compiled from the report of the Nigerian Bar Association Election Observer Group, 2015

The above table shows that there have been progressive reductions in the numbers of electoral petitions in filed by candidates and political parties challenging the outcomes of elections in Nigeria since the introduction of ICT into the nation’s electoral system in 2011. It further reduced significantly in 2015, showing that the adoption of biometric voting technology has made rigging more difficult. The conduct of the 2015 general elections will also be remembered as one in which many candidates that ran for political offices publicly conceded defeats, creating an atmosphere of peace in the post-election period.

### Table 2: Number of States with Reported Case(s) of Ballot Box Snatching During the Presidential Elections in 2007, 2011 and 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Compiled from the report of the Nigerian Bar Association Election Observer Group, 2015

According to INEC, a total of 67,422,005 were registered for the 2015 exercise, out of which 31,746,490 were accredited to vote on the day of the presidential election. Despite this huge number turning out to vote in various locations across the countries, the election of adjudged peaceful in all the states of the federation with the exception of Rivers state. Observers of the 2015 general elections admitted that elections were conducted with orderliness and commitment towards the success of the polls. According to the Commonwealth EOM’s report, the elections mark an important step forward for democracy in Africa’s most populous country and a key member of the Commonwealth. Notwithstanding the organizational and technical deficiencies, the conduct of the elections was generally peaceful and transparent (Ndijieh & Kumolu, 2015). In the same vein, the former Ghanaian President and Head, ECOWAS EOM, Mr. John Kufuor, reports that Nigeria’s feat with regard to the elections is a pride, not only to Nigerians, but also to West Africa and the whole of the African continent. Similarly, the United States Government notes that the peaceful conduct of the elections had demonstrated to the world the strength of Nigeria’s commitment to democratic principles. By turning out in large numbers, and sometimes waiting all day to cast their votes, Nigerians have come together to decide the future of their country peacefully (Adamu, 2015). President Barrack Obama particularly praised INEC and Professor Jega for what independent international observers deemed largely peaceful and orderly elections. Thus, the president of Voters’ Awareness Initiative, Wale Ogunade, surmised that INEC Chairman and his team have gained 80% confidence of Nigerians as a result of the deployment of technology-based approach in handling the elections (Sunday Independent, April 26, 2015).

### CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed the impact of ICT application on the conduct of the 2015 general elections. Specifically, it investigated how the adoption of biometric voting technology improved the credibility of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It
acknowledged the commitment of INEC to conduct free and fair elections, through the adoption of ICT-related electoral reforms. The paper found that the deployment of Smart Card Reader (SCR) led to high credibility ratings of the 2015 electoral exercises by local and international observers, as well as most Nigerians. Reports from many accredited media organizations as well as international observers like Commonwealth, EU, AU, ECOWAS, NDI, IRI, International IDEA, IFES EOMs among others attest to the fact that the elections were peaceful and credible. Although the adaptation of election-related technologies experienced some glitches in its functionality, it largely accounted for the significant drop in the volume of election petitions filed by aggrieved candidates and political parties. This is because of the use of the device for organizing (authentication of PVCs and accreditation of voters) and counting votes (validation of the total votes cast by querying the machine). Arising from the findings of this study, we recommend that there is need to reform the Nigerian Electoral Act to allow for the institutionalization of electronic voting system in the country, as well as improve on sensitization of voters by INEC and other relevant agencies on how election-related machines work.

REFERENCES


